

HOW TO RESEARCH YOUR HISTORIC VIRGINIA PROPERTY

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INTRODUCTION

Owners of old Virginia houses and commercial buildings, and historians of churches and schools, often want to learn more about the history of their property but are not sure how to go about it. Some are content just to satisfy their curiosity, while others hope to get the property listed in the Virginia Landmarks Register (VLR) and the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The National Park Service publication titled *National Register Bulletin 39: Researching a Historic Property* is an excellent general guide to some basic sources and techniques of research. The purpose of *How to Research Your Historic Virginia Property* is to introduce you to some of the useful sources available for learning about the history of a Virginia property, whether or not you intend to nominate it for the registers.

Since its inception in 1966, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) has been compiling information about the old and new, historic and non-historic resources of Virginia. If you own a house or commercial building, DHR may have records concerning it. The file may not answer every question, but it can help you get started down the right research track. For more information, contact the Virginia Department of Historic Resources archives at (804) 367-2323, extension 125.

If you would like to learn more about the register programs, please ask for DHR's free booklet, *Virginia's Historical Registers: A Guide for Property Owners*. This publication explains how the programs got started, the criteria for eligibility, and the procedures for listing qualifying resources.

HELP AT THE LIBRARY

Before plunging into archival records and manuscripts, look first at books. Many historical societies have published books on old buildings in particular counties and cities. Local histories may mention the owners of your property or historical events that took place there. Books on architectural styles can help you estimate your building's date of construction, and many books have been published on historic decoration and furnishings. DHR has many such books in its reference library, and they may be studied there during business hours (8:30 AM - 4:45 PM, Tuesday-Friday). The Library of Virginia (800 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA; 9:00 AM - 5 PM, Monday-Saturday) and local libraries may have copies available for loan.

THINKING ABOUT THE PAST

The questions one can ask about the history of a resource seem endless. This publication will help you find the answers by directing you to the most likely sources. It may be helpful to organize your thoughts about the past before looking for the answers. When researching a building, in particular, the following are some typical questions asked.

About the building: When was it constructed and for whom? Was it built in stages, or all at the same time? What was on the site before it was built? What is its architectural style, and what period of construction might the style suggest? Who was the architect or contractor? What changes have occurred to the building since it was first constructed? What other buildings have stood there?

About its owners: Who has owned it since it was built? What was interesting or significant about his or her life and career? If the building was owned by a congregation or organization, who were the members?

About its history: What happened here? What led up to each event? What were its consequences? How does the history of this property relate to larger events or historical trends?

You may not be able to answer all these questions, but books and records exist to help you answer many of them. This guidebook will describe many of the sources that provide the answers. Along the way, you will encounter historians, archivists, and librarians who will help you. If your search becomes more specialized—if you want to learn about a particular Civil War battle that happened nearby, for instance—they can guide you to the specific sources that have the answers.

ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS

This section repeats the basic research questions asked earlier. Each question is followed by a list of sources in which you might find the answers. The sources most likely to provide the answers are listed first. In the next section, entitled "The Sources," each type of record is listed in alphabetical order and discussed in detail. Remember that you usually do not need to look at every source in order to find the answer to a question. You may come up with additional questions in the course of your research, however, that will prompt you to consult some of the other sources on the list.

One of the first things you should do is place your property in the context of its surroundings - think broadly, not narrowly. Your property has been part of a neighborhood or community for a long time. Some things about its surroundings have changed (neighbors, nearby buildings) while others have remained constant (rivers and creeks, land forms, area landmarks). You will learn much more about your resource and its many owners and occupants if you keep the bigger picture in mind and gather information about the surrounding area as well.

Look at a detailed map of your area. Is there a watercourse or named natural feature, such as a hill, near your property? Is there a well-known landmark, such as an old church or plantation, nearby? Is your property located on an old road or street? The more you know about your neighboring landmarks—both natural and manmade—the easier it will be for you to keep track of your property through time.

Generate a list of names and subjects as you proceed to use for key word searches on computer databases, the Internet, and in book indexes. Add to and subtract from this list as you continue with your research areas,

When trying to establish a building's date of construction or original owner, work from the known to the unknown, from the present to the past. Use local histories and the land tax books to trace the property back to the first owner. Use the deeds and other records noted below to verify and supplement what the land tax books tell you. Sometimes, even after copious research, the date of construction cannot be determined from documents. This is especially true of colonial building and in localities where the records are incomplete. In such instances you may need to consult an architectural historian, who may supply an approximate date based on a knowledge of construction techniques, nails, saw marks, and so forth.

THE HOUSE OR COMMERCIAL BUILDING:

When was it built, and for whom?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Land Tax Books
- Tax Assessor's Office (for urban properties)
- Building Permits and Blueprints (for urban properties)
- Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia
- Personal Papers
- Student Papers
- Family Histories
- Business Records
- Church Records
- Maps; Plats; Atlases; Aerial Photographs
- City Directories
- Deeds
- Wills, Inventories, and Estate Divisions
- Patents and Grants
- Newspapers
- Works Progress Administration Virginia Historical Inventory Project
- CRM Reports

What was on the site before the building was constructed?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Local and State Histories
- Land Tax Books
- Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia
- Personal Papers
- Business Records
- Maps; Plats; Atlases; Aerial Photographs
- City Directories
- Historical Photographs and Illustrations
- Census Records
- Newspapers
- CRM Reports

What is the architectural style of the building; what period of construction does it suggest?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Architectural Style Books
- Student Papers
- Theme Files
- CRM Reports

Who was the architect or contractor?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Biographical Dictionaries
- Business Records
- *The Manufacturers Record*

What changes have occurred to the building since it was first constructed, and what other buildings have stood there?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Land Taxes
- Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia

- Historical Photographs and Illustrations
- Personal Papers
- Student Papers
- Business Records
- Maps; Plats; Atlases; Aerial Photographs
- City Directories
- Deeds
- Newspapers
- Wills, Inventories, and Estate Divisions
- Personal Property Tax Books
- CRM Reports

THE OWNERS:

Who has owned or occupied the building since it was constructed?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Land Taxes
- Deeds
- Wills, Inventories, and Estate Divisions
- Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia
- Maps; Plates; Atlases
- Census Records
- City Directories
- Family Histories
- Biographical Dictionaries
- Business Records
- Church Records
- Personal Papers
- Vital Statistics Records
- Personal Property Tax Books

What is interesting or significant about the owner's life and career?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Biographical Dictionaries
- Student Papers
- Professional Directories
- Local and State Histories
- Family Histories
- S. Bassett French Collection
- Theme Files
- Newspapers

THE HISTORY:

What happened here?

- Architectural Survey Files
- Local and State Histories
- Newspapers
- Personal Papers
- Student Papers
- CRM Reports

THE SOURCES

The records listed under each question in the foregoing section are arranged here in alphabetical order and discussed in some detail. Some records may be available in more than one location or repository; in such cases suggestions are made as to the best place to look.

The name of the repository (each located in the city of Richmond) is abbreviated: DHR (Department of Historic Resources); LVA (Library of Virginia; formerly the Virginia State Library and Archives); VHS (Virginia Historical Society); VM (Valentine Museum: Richmond History Center). The next section, titled "The Repositories," presents information about each repository (address, telephone number, hours of operation, and so forth).

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Locations: DHR, VDOT offices, USDA web site.

Aerial photographs can provide documented history information as to the progression of a site on which a resource is located. They can show how the area developed over the years in photography. DHR has a small collection of aerial photographs, but also has the ability to use the GIS system to look at current aerial photography in house. The Virginia Department of Transportation has a collection of aerial photographs they have taken over the years at their downtown Richmond location. Also current aerial photographs may be ordered at www.apfo.usda.gov/. The Farm Service Agency is another source of aerial photographs. Each county should have its own office. County office divisions such as environmental planning or county mapping may also be good locations to check for aerial photographs.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE BOOKS

Locations: DHR; LVA; VHS; other libraries; bookstores.

Several guides to American architectural styles have been published. Some are designed for the mass market, while others are aimed at scholars and architectural historians, who often debate stylistic classifications and technical terminology. A good compromise for the homeowner/researcher is Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). The book has a bibliography in the back that lists other sources in the field, including some regional and local guides. For a guide to commercial and other buildings as well as dwellings, see John C. Poppeliers, S. Allen Chambers, Jr., and Nancy B. Schwartz, *What Style is It?* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1983). VHS has a notable and rare collection of pattern books. These are the guides to architectural styles and design details used by architects and builders ranging from Thomas Jefferson to local contractors.

DHR has a small research library containing many of the most popular pattern books.

ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY FILES

Locations: DHR, local historical societies.

Since its creation in 1966, DHR has conducted a statewide survey of historic buildings, urban and rural districts, and archaeological sites. Often working with local governments and private organizations, DHR assembles historical, architectural, landscape, and archaeological information, photographs, drawings, and maps for each property surveyed, and the resulting data are added to the DHR archives. If your building has been surveyed, information about it will be in a file at DHR. Also, if your property already is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, a copy of the nomination will be in the files. An individual property may also be located within a surveyed district and there would be basic information on the individual property as well as detailed information on the area around it.

BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES

Locations: LVA; other libraries.

For men and women of national significance, the standard reference source for many years has been Allan Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928-1937). Supplements have brought the biographical sketches up to 1980.

Several other biographical dictionaries have been issued, of varying degrees of completeness and accuracy. Perhaps the best-known reliable source is the *Who's Who in America* series, now divided into national regions and, like the *DAB*, available in most libraries. Many libraries also have volumes of *Who was Who* and regional and ethnic biographical directories.

The Publications and Public Affairs Division of the Library of Virginia is preparing a monumental biographical project, the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. It will be "a multivolume reference work containing biographies of all Virginians, regardless of place of birth or death, who were significant in the history or culture of their locality, state, and nation, including Kentucky prior to 1792 and West Virginia prior to 1863." The *Dictionary* subjects will go well beyond the obvious categories of politicians and soldiers to include "all Virginians who were notable in local, state, national, or international history—be they farmers, entertainers, artists, scientists, physicians, lawyers, journalists, diplomats, athletes, aviators, musicians, craftsmen, clergy, pioneers, criminals, or poets." The first volume, containing A-B biographies, should be published in the next year or two.

The state archives at the Library of Virginia holds a collection of biographical data that is available on microfilm to researchers. It was compiled by S. Bassett French (1820-1898), a Virginia government official whose avocation was assembling biographical sketches of notable citizens of the nineteenth century. Many of the subjects of this collection are now forgotten figures and biographical data concerning them is hard to come by elsewhere.

It is more difficult to obtain information about architects. The vast majority of Virginia buildings were not individually architect-designed. Most were constructed by local builders and contractors whose names are lost to history. Even when a building is so elaborate or unusual or reminiscent of an architect's known work that a historian would believe that it *must* be architect-designed, often the architect cannot be identified. Many architectural records have come and gone along with the architects.

Most buildings in America have been constructed from stock plans. Until the late nineteenth century, these plans either came from pattern books published by architects or from the minds of the builders, who based them on other structures they had seen or built. Houses individually designed by architects for specific clients were largely the province of the wealthy, not the middle class.

Because architect-designed buildings are relatively rare, architectural historians have been careful to record them. The architectural survey files at the Department of Historic Resources are a rich source of information. Architect-designed buildings are often noted, or at least attributed, in local histories, guides to old houses, and other publications. Information about the architects themselves, their lives and works, is often difficult to come by. One resource is the American Institute of Architects Library and Archives, 1735 New York Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20006-5292; telephone 202-626-7492. The AIA charges for research services, so call or write first.

Fortunately, enterprising architectural historians have combed through newspapers, building permit files, and other records to compile and publish lists of architects and some of their

identifiable works. For many years the standard authority on the subject was Henry F. Withey and Elsie B. Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1970). However, a book by John E. Wells and Robert E. Dalton, *The Virginia Architects, 1820-1955: A Biographical Dictionary* (Richmond: The New South Architectural Press, 1997) presents more data than did the Witheys concerning Virginia architects.

BUSINESS RECORDS

Locations: LVA; VM; VHS. Usually in manuscript form, sometimes microfilmed. May contain letters, letter books, ledgers, etc.

One expects to find businesses functioning in the commercial centers of towns and cities, but in rural areas many businesses were conducted in or near one's home. Farmers sometimes owned blacksmith shops or general stores, and the records of these businesses often can tell you something about the people who operated them. Likewise, they can reveal what people were buying, how they furnished and decorated their houses, and how they lived in general.

The Library of Virginia has a large collection of business records, and one series is of particular interest to researchers of houses. It is the papers and photographs of George B. Lorraine, a real estate agent in Richmond and Northumberland County, ca. 1930-1970. He specialized in eastern Virginia houses, especially farms and large estates. For descriptions of this and other business records, see Conley L. Edwards III, Gwendolyn D. Clark, and Jennifer D. McDaid, comps., *A Guide to Business Records in the Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, 1994).

If your structure was built between 1882 and 1932—particularly if it is stylistically noteworthy and you suspect it was designed by an architect but you do not know his name—you should consult the *Manufacturers Record*, which is available at the Library of Virginia. This weekly business magazine listed construction projects all over the South, including private dwellings, industrial structures, and small businesses as well as public buildings such as courthouses, and gave the names of the architects and contractors.

Other business publications worth consulting, if they exist for your area, are the promotional brochures produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by chambers of commerce and railroad companies. They often contain illustrations and descriptions of the homes of prominent citizens, locally important businesses, and tourist attractions.

CENSUS RECORDS

Location: LVA.

The United States has taken a census of its inhabitants every ten years beginning in 1790. Unfortunately, the censuses of 1790, 1800, and 1890 were destroyed by fire; part of the 1810 census also was lost. A microfilm copy of each surviving Virginia census from 1810 to 1920 is at the LVA. In addition, certain special schedules also are available. They include Agriculture, 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880; Industry, 1820, 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880; Slaves, 1850 and 1860; and Social Statistics, 1850, 1860, and 1870.

The census of inhabitants did not include the name and age of every person in a family until 1850. Earlier censuses only give the name of the head of the household and the numbers of other household members grouped by age and sex. Beginning with the 1850 census, occupations and literacy are also noted.

The Agriculture schedules tell which crops and livestock were raised; the value of the farm and its equipment; and the number of improved and unimproved acres. A comparison of the various years available yields a fascinating picture of changes in farming.

The Industry schedules list the different kinds of industries active in each locality, including mills, quarries, factories, mines, ironworks, etc. Data includes raw materials consumed, quantities of products manufactured, and the numbers of employees and their wages.

The Slave schedules, unfortunately, do not give the names of the slaves, only their sex and age. They are grouped in each locality under the name of the slave owner.

The Social Statistics schedules list, for each locality, the numbers of schools (with race and numbers of students for each), numbers of churches (with their seating capacities), and denominations by name.

CHURCH RECORDS

Locations: LVA; VHS; individual churches; institutional church repositories.

Church records may contain lists of births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. They may consist of vestry or session minutes. They may mention the construction or repair of a church building. In other words, their contents may be personal or institutional. They may be kept at individual churches, or in the collections of a church historical society. One of the largest collections of church records (many on microfilm or in other copy formats) is found at the Library of Virginia. See Jewell T. Clark and Elizabeth Terry Long, comps., *A Guide to Church Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, 1988). The Virginia Historical Society also has original and microfilmed church records.

CITY AND BUSINESS DIRECTORIES

Locations: LVA; VHS; VM; other libraries.

In the mid-nineteenth century, urban centers began to publish directories of inhabitants and businesses. Later in the century, regional directories appeared that generally included a city and surrounding counties at a minimum. The directories are arranged like telephone books, except that they give names, occupations, and street addresses. After 1880, they include a section arranged by street address, so you do not have to know the name of the occupant to locate a property. Most directories also have separate lists of businesses, craftsmen, and tradesmen. They are excellent guides to the occupations and businesses of Virginians during the last century or more and include extensive local advertising.

Examples of directories include: *Elliott & Nye's Virginia Directory, and Business Register for 1852*; *Randall's Business Directory of Winchester, Berryville, and Front Royal, Virginia* (1892/93); *Virginia Business Directory and Gazetteer* (1878-1917); *Virginia State Business Directory* (1871/72); and many others.

DEEDS

Best location: LVA to approximately 1865, local courthouses thereafter. For urban properties, start at the Tax Assessor's Office for the most current information and work backwards from there, such as parcel number and deed numbers.

Second best locations: local courthouses and clerks' offices.

Deeds are the records of the transfer of lands and buildings, or personal property, from a seller to a buyer. A deed contains the names of the parties involved, their places of residence, the purchase price, a description of the property (with metes and bounds in the case of land), and legal language ensuring the "quiet and peaceable" possession of the property by the new owner.

Rarely do deeds specifically mention buildings, except in boilerplate legal terms calculated to convey all types of property that is an integral part of the land. Such phraseology may include "all houses, barns, trees, fields, orchards, watercourses," etc., whether or not they actually existed. On the other hand, buildings used for special purposes, such as churches and schools, may be mentioned in deeds. In such cases the property is usually conveyed to or by a group of trustees, a school board or superintendent, and so forth.

It is often difficult to use deeds to trace a particular piece of property containing a house or business, because the deed probably will not mention whether a building stands on the tract, and the boundary description seldom includes enough known landmarks to make the location obvious. If a tract contained more than a few acres, the chances are that pieces were sold off over the years. It is often not possible to tell from the deed alone whether the portion sold contained the building, or whether that part remained with the seller. Confusion can be avoided by using the LAND TAX BOOKS (see below) to trace the property instead, or by examining county plat books if they exist.

For most localities, indexed deed books (in which the deeds were recorded) exist as well as the original documents. The state archives at the Library of Virginia holds many original records. In addition, it has microfilm of the books, through about 1865, available for use in-house and on interlibrary loan.

If you reach a dead-end while going backwards through the deeds, keep in mind there are indexes by date ranges listed under both buyers' and sellers' last names.

For lists of the Library's holdings, see Suzanne Smith Ray, Lyndon H. Hart III, and J. Christian Kolbe, *A Preliminary Guide to Pre-1904 County Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, [1994]) and Lyndon H. Hart III and J. Christian Kolbe, *A Preliminary Guide to Pre-1904 Municipal Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, [1987]).

FAMILY HISTORIES

Locations: LVA; VHS; other libraries.

Two principal centers for genealogical research in Virginia, the Library of Virginia and the Virginia Historical Society, hold large numbers of published genealogies and family histories. In addition, their archives maintain family papers, Bible records, and other documents. For the archival resources in the Library of Virginia, see Lyndon H. Hart III, *A Guide to Bible Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1985) and *A Guide to Genealogical Notes and Charts in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1983).

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Locations: DHR; LVA; VHS; VM.

Most buildings have undergone a surprising number of changes since they were built. Owners have replaced roofs, torn down porches, added ells and wings, and redecorated with new woodwork to follow changing fashions, just to name a few common alterations. Sometimes the "ghost" outlines of porches or mantels remain behind to help in restoration, but old photographs can be much more useful.

To find such photographs, look first at published local or regional histories, especially those with an "old homes" approach. Ask at local public and college libraries, too, as many have newspaper and manuscript files on their communities that may include old photographs.

If there is an architectural survey file at the Department of Historic Resources, or if your building is listed in the Virginia Landmarks Register or the National Register of Historic Places, the relevant DHR files may contain historic photographs. Likewise, such photos may be found in the picture and post card collections at the Library of Virginia, the Virginia Historical Society, and the Valentine Museum, which has the notes and photographs of Mary Wingfield Scott, Richmond's foremost early- to mid-twentieth-century architectural historian and preservationist. The Library of Virginia holds two collections that contain photographs dating to the 1930s: the George B. Lorraine real estate company (see BUSINESS RECORDS above) and the WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION HISTORICAL INVENTORY PROJECT (below).

Besides photographs, look for other kinds of illustrative material, such as old engravings and paintings of towns and cities. In the nineteenth century, "bird's-eye views" of towns and cities were painted and engraved, often in amazing detail. Also, thousands of photographs and field drawings made during the Civil War were reproduced in magazines and newspapers as engravings, particularly in *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. These engravings have been widely reproduced in illustrated histories of the war.

LAND TAX BOOKS

Best location: LVA. Almost complete original records, 1782-present. Land taxes 1782-1850 have been microfilmed; film may be borrowed on interlibrary loan. Second best locations: County and city courthouses. Records tend to be spotty and incomplete.

Virginia's land tax records begin in 1782 and still are being compiled. They are arranged alphabetically by county and independent city, then chronologically. A given locality may have more than one tax book per year; as the population increased the locality was divided into districts or wards, each with its own volume. Within each volume the taxpayers are listed alphabetically (until the twentieth century by the initial letter of the last name). Beginning in the 1880s they were grouped by race.

From 1782 to 1819 the records give the following information: name of taxpayer; number of acres in tract; value per acre; total value of tract; amount of tax; remarks. From 1820 to the present the records show the following: name of taxpayer; county or city of residence; number of acres in tract; value per acre; value added to property because of buildings; total value of tract; amount of tax on land and buildings; remarks. In addition, after 1819—and sometimes before—there are columns for the location of the property ("Staunton River"; "Coles Hill"; "Woodlands"; "adj. [adjacent to] Charles Carter") and its approximate distance and direction from the courthouse ("12SE"="twelve miles southeast").

Of particular importance to researching a historic property are the columns for the value added because of buildings and for remarks. If a building is constructed on the tract it usually is noted in both columns. For instance, an increase in the first column from \$500 to \$2,000 should be noted as well as a comment on the order of "\$1,500 added for new construction" under remarks. If the property is sold or subdivided, the remarks column usually notes that fact ("30 acres to Joseph Smith"). If the 30-acre tract is what you are interested in, you will find it listed under "Smith, Joseph."

A warning: sometimes a change in the column for value added because of buildings indicates a tax reassessment rather than new construction. Statewide reassessments were made in 1817, 1819-1820, 1839-1840, 1850, 1856, 1870, 1872, 1875, and every five years thereafter. Do not assume that an increase in the value added column during or just after one of those years means new construction; check the remarks column for a clear statement to that effect. Look at other properties in the tax list; if their values also changed, then you

are in a reassessment year. Remember that a decrease in the value added column does not necessarily mean that buildings were destroyed or demolished. It probably indicates a reduction in the value of an older building during a reassessment year.

What can you conclude from the values assigned to buildings? As a very rough rule of thumb, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a value of \$500 or so might indicate a small story-and-a-half frame dwelling. A value of \$1,500 or \$2,000 could suggest an elaborate frame house or a relatively modest two-story brick dwelling one room deep. Values of more than \$3,000 generally hint at mansion-sized houses, often of brick, two stories high, and two rooms deep on each story. The value declined as a house aged and deteriorated.

Churches and schools, which are owned by religious bodies and local governments, are not subject to taxation. The land tax books can still be of some use, however; if the land was conveyed by a private citizen to a congregation or school board, that transfer may be noted under the citizen's name in the year it took place. This notation may substitute for the missing deeds of a county that has lost its records through some disaster.

For more information about land taxes, see Library of Virginia, Archives Research Notes Number 1, *Using Land Tax Records*, available from the Library of Virginia.

LOCAL AND STATE HISTORIES

Locations: DHR; LVA; VHS; local libraries.

The best one-volume guide to the history of Virginia is Emily J. Salmon and Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., eds., *The Hornbook of Virginia History*, 4th ed. (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1994). Besides presenting a brief narrative history of the state, the *Hornbook* serves as "a ready-reference guide to the Old Dominion's people, places, and past." It contains lists of the state's executive officers, "Virginians in the Nation's Service," counties, cities, colonial parishes, rivers, selected historic places of worship and houses, as well as a host of other data.

Histories have been published about most of the cities, counties, and regions of Virginia. They vary widely in accuracy, scholarship, and reliance on local tradition or documentary sources. Your property or its owners may be mentioned, but you should exercise caution in assessing what is written, especially concerning the dates ascribed to early buildings.

You should consult your local public or college libraries for unpublished collections of notes and clippings as well as for printed histories. Many a local historian has spent years compiling data but never gotten around to writing or publishing the results.

MAPS; PLATS; ATLASES

Locations: DHR; LVA; VHS; VM.

The Library of Virginia and the Virginia Historical Society have large collections of maps, ranging from general maps of the state to specialized maps showing the surveyed routes of turnpikes and railroads. Maps can be very useful in getting you started on the way to tracing the ownership of your property, especially if you are uncertain of the names of the owners in the nineteenth century and earlier. For example, if you own a house that was constructed in a style popular in the mid-nineteenth century, such as the Greek Revival, it likely was built before the Civil War. It probably will appear on Civil War-era maps with the name of the owner or occupant noted. You can now go from the map to the LAND TAX BOOKS (see above) and begin tracing the line of ownership.

For many years beginning in the 1870s, the Sanborn-Perris Map Company produced maps of towns and cities for use by insurance companies. These maps showed the configuration

or "footprint" of each building on its lot, noted the materials of which it was constructed, and indicated its function. They are an invaluable source of information for all kinds of structures in urban settings. A complete set of original maps is in the Library of Congress; the Library of Virginia has a microfilm copy, as well as many originals. The Valentine Museum has a card index to properties noted on the maps for the city of Richmond.

Sometimes plats of specific tracts of land (see PATENTS AND GRANTS below) are filed in map collections. They typically note the metes and bounds of the tracts, as well as any roads or watercourses that border or cross the boundaries. You may occasionally find a plat on which a stylized dwelling or other building is drawn.

City and county courthouses often contain record groups that include plats and other useful information concerning buildings and their owners. You may find plat books that date to the colonial period in some localities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many farmers went bankrupt, resulting in hundreds of lawsuits. Often the court papers contain plats and accounts of land divisions. Finally, beginning in the late nineteenth century, many localities (especially cities) began issuing building permits. Frequently, plats and drawings are found in the permit files.

Atlases can also be useful sources of information about standing structures. One of the best is *The Official Atlas of the Civil War* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1958), which was compiled from the official records of the war. If your building was constructed before the war began, and if there was military activity in or near your county, there is a good chance that the property and the name of its owner or occupant will appear in this atlas.

For more information about maps, see Library of Virginia, Archives Research Notes Number 4, *Using the Map Collection in the Archives*, available from the Library of Virginia.

MUTUAL ASSURANCE SOCIETY OF VIRGINIA

Locations: DHR; LVA. Assurance declarations are indexed under the city or county in which the property is located by the name of the person taking out the policy, and by the name or type of property.

The "Mutual Assurance Society, against Fire on Buildings, of the State of Virginia," was incorporated by the General Assembly on 22 December 1794, and still is in operation. It is not so much an insurance company as a mutual aid society whose members have pooled their resources for the protection of each property. Initially, the Society assured against losses on brick and frame buildings in Virginia, present-day West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. In 1820 it stopped assuring frame structures, and in 1822 it abolished its country branch (quit assuring buildings not in towns or cities). Its insurance policies, or "declarations," are fascinating historical documents that contain descriptions of many Virginia houses and commercial buildings, and a smaller number of churches, schools, and public buildings. Usually each declaration includes the value of each building insured; a drawing showing the relationship and distance from one building to another (and sometimes a front elevation of the principal building); and a description of each building ("A dwelling house 32 feet by 20 one storey high with a shed of 10 feet by 10 on one side with a porch at the side of the shed 8 feet by 10, [walls] built of wood and covered with wood [shingles]"). Since properties were frequently revaluated, succeeding declarations often show additions to the original building, new outbuildings, and new uses for old buildings.

Some caution should be exercised when using these records, however. Just because a policy was taken out in 1806, for example, does not necessarily mean that the structure was newly built. It could have been an older building insured for the first time. Near the bottom of the policy is a paragraph that will state both the insured amount (the "present value") and the replacement cost: if they are identical, the building was new; if the present value is less

than the replacement cost, then the building was not new and a deduction was made for deterioration. Also, owners were not obliged to insure every building; often, for instance, only the main house and kitchen were insured but not other outbuildings. In other words, the declarations may not list every structure on the site.

NEWSPAPERS

Locations: LVA; VHS; VM; other libraries.

Although newspaper publishing in Virginia dates to the eighteenth century, and many papers have opened and folded over the years, there may be few extant copies of early small-town newspapers. For a list of known copies of Virginia newspapers (as of 1936), see Lester J. Cappon, *Virginia Newspapers, 1821-1935: A Bibliography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1936). Virginia's colonial newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, has been indexed. See Lester J. Cappon and Stella F. Duff, *Virginia Gazette Index, 1736-1780* (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950).

The Library of Virginia holds thousands of original newspapers, as well as copies on microfilm. They also have a subject file for news articles called "the Freeman File" which can be obtained from the reference desk. To find out if a particular newspaper exists, write the Library.

Many libraries hold newspaper clippings under various subjects, or indexes to birth, marriage, and death records published in the papers and abstracted by local historians and genealogists. Also, nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers sometimes carried articles about ground-breaking or opening ceremonies for important commercial and public buildings, as well as photographs, drawings, and illustrated advertisements that may show you how an old mercantile structure looked when it was new. The articles and illustrations also may give the name of the architect or builder.

PATENTS AND GRANTS

Location: LVA.

The state archives at the Library of Virginia holds the records of the Land Office, including patents and grants. The royal governors of Virginia issued patents in the name of the king between 1623 and 1774. After an interlude because of the Revolutionary War, the state's elected governors began issuing land grants in 1779. In the Northern Neck Proprietary (that part of Virginia north of the Rappahannock River), the Fairfax family issued its own grants between 1690 and 1808.

Colonial patents were in effect purchases of land directly from the royal government rather than from another subject. Anyone could pay the fees and obtain a patent; although the document was issued in the name of the king, it did not mean that the king and the recipient knew each other (the statement is sometimes made that someone "received a patent from the king").

Some patents were issued for the importation of "headrights." To encourage immigration to the colony, fifty acres of land could be claimed by anyone paying for an immigrant's transportation. Often the names of the immigrants were included in the patent document. This fact is sometimes construed to mean that the immigrant arrived from England in the year the patent was issued, but that was not necessarily the case. The patent was issued after proof that the transportation fees were paid, and the process could have taken some years. Also, the immigrants could have been from countries other than England, or even from other colonies. Finally, just because the patent was issued for land in a particular county, that does not mean that the immigrant lived there, only that the county was where the vacant land was found.

Because patents—and grants—were issued to encourage actual settlement and not land speculation (although the latter occurred anyway), the recipients were given three years to "seat and save" the patent, which otherwise would revert to the colony. In other words, the patentee was supposed to erect a building on the land and improve part of it within three years. Sometimes present-day owners assume, erroneously, that a dwelling obviously dating from the colonial period was built the year the patent was issued. It is far more likely that the patentee erected some temporary structure, now long-vanished, and that the dwelling currently standing was built a generation or more later. This is certainly true of seventeenth-century patents and generally true of those issued in the eighteenth century.

Besides the patents and grants, which like deeds give the metes and bounds of the property, the researcher will find the extant plats useful. Unfortunately, the Land Office burned the plats annually before 1774 once the patent had been issued, so few colonial plats survive. An exception is the Northern Neck Proprietary, which kept its plats. Plats are generally available after 1779 statewide, and some of them show—besides the boundaries of the property—watercourses, woodlots, and dwellings.

For a detailed list of all the records of the Land Office, see Daphne S. Gentry, comp., and John S. Salmon, ed., *Virginia Land Office Inventory*, 3d ed., rev. and enl. (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, 1988). See also Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, 3 vols., in various editions, for abstracts of patents, 1623–1732. Two additional volumes, published by the Virginia Genealogical Society, have brought the series up to 1749. These are also now searchable online under the digital library/land records.

PERSONAL PAPERS

Locations: LVA; VHS; VM.

Letters, diaries, unpublished memoirs, and other items comprise personal papers collections at several repositories. Perhaps the two largest collections in Virginia are found at the Virginia Historical Society and the Library of Virginia. These papers may tell you about the private and public lives of owners, the construction and maintenance of their houses and commercial buildings, and the operation of their farms and businesses. All of the repositories holding personal papers have guides or indexes to them for use in-house.

A frequent shortcoming of letters and diaries is that their authors often omit any mention of the familiar: a diarist may live in a house for years and yet never describe it directly. On the other hand, a traveler who keeps a diary or writes letters about his journey may comment at length on what to him appears unusual, often in highly opinionated and judgmental language. Look, then, for travelers' diaries and letters that pertain to your area; some may have been published in local historical society magazines.

PERSONAL PROPERTY TAX BOOKS

Best location: LVA. Almost complete original records, 1782-present. The library began microfilming the tax books, 1782-1850, in alphabetical order by locality, but has not completed the project. The existing film is available on interlibrary loan. Second best locations: County and city courthouses. Records tend to be spotty and incomplete.

The personal property tax books can help you assess the relative prosperity of your building's owners, based on personal property owned and taxes paid. The books give the following information: name of taxpayer; number of horses; number of cattle (during a few early years); number of slaves above age twelve (through 1863); other categories of taxes levied; and amount of taxes paid. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, taxes were levied almost exclusively on machinery, vehicles, and intangible personal property such as bonds. Usually the tax books also list by name the persons who received licenses to

operate taverns, ordinaries, businesses, and other occupations.

The categories of taxes levied on personal property in 1815 were increased significantly to pay for the War of 1812. Carriages, paintings, gold watches, billiard tables, and a wide variety of other items were taxed, making the tax books for this year a rich source of information concerning personal belongings. Also taxed were dwellings located in the country that were worth more than \$500 (the number of dwellings and their value, or sometimes only the difference between \$500 and their value, is given). This is the only year in which buildings were mentioned in the personal property tax books.

No tax books exist for the years 1808 or 1864. In 1808, the General Assembly ordered the commissioners of the revenue not to collect taxes that year. On 3 March 1864 the legislature suspended the revenue act because the treasury already held adequate funds.

For more information about personal property taxes, see Library of Virginia, Archives Research Notes Number 3, *Using Personal Property Tax Records in the Archives*, available from the Library of Virginia.

PROFESSIONAL DIRECTORIES

Locations: LVA; other libraries.

If you know the profession or trade of an owner of your house or commercial structure, he may be listed in a published directory of professions or trades. Many such directories have been printed, and each is a sort of *Who's Who* for a particular occupation. Besides outlining professional careers, the directories may give personal data as well.

SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL RECORDS

Locations: LVA, school libraries; newspaper; local Historical Societies.

Information on schools, teachers, and events can be found in documents such as local school board minutes or *The Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Institutions* (at the Library of Virginia).

STUDENT PAPERS

Locations: DHR; University Libraries

Student Papers often provide a solid beginning for research on topics including buildings, architects, owners, architectural materials, etc. For example, Virginia Commonwealth University has courses whose professors require well researched papers on buildings and style information around the city of Richmond. These papers should also include solid bibliographies that will lead a researcher back to original referenced material.

TAX ASSESSOR'S OFFICE

Locations: City Hall Buildings

The Tax Assessor will have the most current information on properties within its city, including current owner, most recent deed purchase, and tax parcel number. This will provide a starting point for deed research and provide some current property information such as lot size, building materials, construction date, addition dates.

THEME FILES

Locations: DHR, LVA, VM, other libraries

Many facilities have files on subjects that include things such as unpublished papers or news clippings. For example, DHR has files under subject headings such as; bridges, barns,

ironwork, and Colonial buildings, while the Richmond Public Library has files under headings such as; street names, company names, and individual's last names. Ask the archivist or someone at the reference desk for assistance.

VITAL STATISTICS RECORDS

Location: LVA.

The state did not begin keeping vital records (births, marriages, deaths) until 1853. Before then, birth and death records were maintained (if at all) by churches (see CHURCH RECORDS). Marriage bonds, and in many cases records of marriages, were kept by county and city governments before 1853.

The Library of Virginia has microfilm copies of the state's records of births (1853-1896), marriages (1853-1935), and deaths (1853-1896). It also has indexes to the birth and marriage records, in the latter case by both groom and bride. No index to death records has been compiled.

Birth and death records were not kept by the state between 1897 and 1911. Beginning in 1912 for those records, and 1936 for marriage records, you must apply in person at the Department of Health in Richmond and pay a fee. Birth and death records are released only to relatives or lawyers; you can obtain copies if you submit a letter of permission from the family. For further information, write the Department of Health, Division of Vital Records, Madison Building, Richmond, VA 23219; or telephone 804-786-6228.

For more information about vital statistics records, see Library of Virginia, Archives Research Notes Number 2, *Using Vital Statistics Records in the Archives*, available from the Library of Virginia.

WILLS, INVENTORIES, AND ESTATE DIVISIONS

Best location: LVA. Second best locations: local courthouses and clerk's offices.

Wills present the deceased's wishes as to the distribution of his or her estate. Inventories list personal property, excluding land, and sometimes indicate the tract on which the property was kept, or the room in the house or commercial structure in which it was found. Divisions of estates, often made when there was no will or when a will was disputed by the heirs, often include land as well as other property. Sometimes plats are recorded along with the divisions.

For most localities, indexed will books (in which all the foregoing documents were recorded) exist as well as the original papers. The state archives at the Library of Virginia holds many original books and papers. In addition, it has microfilm of the books, through about 1865, available for use in-house and on interlibrary loan.

For lists of the Library's holdings, see Suzanne Smith Ray, Lyndon H. Hart III, and J. Christian Kolbe, *A Preliminary Guide to Pre-1904 County Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, [1994]) and Lyndon H. Hart III and J. Christian Kolbe, *A Preliminary Guide to Pre-1904 Municipal Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library and Archives* (Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, [1987]).

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION HISTORICAL INVENTORY PROJECT

Best location: On line, through the LVA web site.

The WPA Historical Inventory Project, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, began in November 1935 and ended by 1939. It employed clerks, writers, and

editors to survey and record the historic cultural and architectural resources of the state. The field workers wrote descriptions and took photographs of thousands of buildings, objects, and structures. The quality of these reports varies widely, and they often contain a mixture of documented facts and local legends. The photographs are always useful, however, as records of a building's appearance in the late 1930s.

The Library of Virginia holds the original files and photographs. These records are now available on line. Searching may be done by keyword, by category, as well as through scanned copies of the 1930s-era highway maps used to record the locations of the historical resources that were recorded during this project. Microfilm copies of the project files in alphabetical order by locality (Film 509; 30 reels) are available for use at the Library of Virginia as well, and for interlibrary loan within the state. Every county and city in Virginia is represented in the files except for the counties of Amelia, Bland, Brunswick, Charles City, Charlotte, Clarke, Essex, King and Queen, Mathews, Richmond, and Smyth. The photographs of houses, churches, schools, businesses, and other buildings that accompanied the files were separated from them before microfilming and were then transferred to the library's Picture Collection. You will need to examine the microfilm and visit the Picture Collection in order to see the complete record in person. The online records include the images with TIFF files of each individual page of the record for the property or object.

THE PRINCIPAL REPOSITORIES

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HISTORIC RESOURCES

2801 Kensington Avenue
Richmond, VA 23221
(804) 367-2323 Ext. 125 (archives)
www.dhr.virginia.gov

Hours: 8:30 A.M.-4:30 P.M., Tuesday-Friday. Closed on Mondays, Saturdays and state holidays.

Telephone inquiries?: Yes, but much better to come in person and review the files yourself. Custodian of the official state survey of Virginia's historic resources and archaeological sites. More than 130,000 files.

LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

800 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219
(804) 692-3500
www.lva.lib.va.us

Hours: 9:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M., Monday-Saturday. Closed on state holidays.

Telephone inquiries?: No, except for general questions about the availability of records; for specific research queries, you must come in person or request interlibrary loan microfilm if available.

The research library at the seat of government and custodian of the official records of the Commonwealth.

VALENTINE MUSEUM: RICHMOND HISTORY CENTER

1015 East Clay Street
Richmond, VA 23219
(804) 649-0711
www.valentinemuseum.com

Hours (for library use): 10:00 A.M.-Noon, 1:00-5:00 P.M., Tuesdays and Thursdays, by appointment only. Nominal fee.
Telephone inquiries?: Yes, but much better to visit in person.
The museum of the city of Richmond, it includes artifacts, a library, a photo archive, and a manuscript collection.

VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

428 North Boulevard
Richmond, VA 23221
(804) 358-4901
www.vahistorical.org

Hours: 10:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M., Monday-Saturday; galleries only, 1:00-5:00 P.M., Sunday.
Closed most holidays. Nominal fee.
Telephone inquiries?: Yes, but much better to come in person or to request films and books through interlibrary loan.
Called "The Center for Virginia History," the Virginia Historical Society includes a historical museum, a library, and a large manuscript collection. Many of the manuscripts are cross-referenced in card catalogs.

LOCAL REPOSITORIES

In addition to the repositories listed above, you may need to visit others locally to see specific public records. Building permits typically are found at city or town halls. Court records, deeds, wills, and the like that are not in the state archives at the Library of Virginia (on film or in the original) are maintained at the clerk's offices in Virginia's county seats. Some local government offices will answer telephone inquiries, but many are so busy that you are better advised to write or—first choice—visit the office yourself. Many local libraries (public, university, or collegiate) have area history rooms or collections, as well as student papers on surrounding architectural themes. Similarly, county or city historical societies or museums may hold photographs, newspaper files, and other information about area businesses, houses, churches, schools, and other buildings.

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